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AUTHOR Wallston, Barbara Strudler
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ABSTRACT

Research on women and employment, and on women generally, has had a tendency to focus on either person or situation variables, overlooking behavior as a function of the interaction of both. The omission of situation variables and the concentration on person variables in research on women and employment has serious consequences in drawing policy implications. The proportion of variance must be known, since research summaries suggest that situation-person variables generally account for more variance than either alone. Society also confounds the variables, using person explanations for characteristics which really are situation-determined. Various examples from the literature on women and employment show some of the influence of structures and the revokability of women's career choices and development, but the major theories of career development fail to understand the importance of the mediating variable of sex roles. (LS)

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SITUATION vs. PERSON VARIABLES in RESEARCH on WOMEN and EMPLOYMENT

Barbara Strudler Wallston
George Peabody College

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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SITUATION vs. PERSON VARIABLES
in RESEARCH on WOMEN and EMPLOYMENT

Today, I have one major point to make. I will make it in the context of research on women and employment, but it is relevant to research on women generally and, even more generally, to any psychological research from which policy implications are to be drawn. The issue is the level and type of variables which are used and the implications this has for policy.

Lewin (1951) has said that behavior is a function of person and situation. This is the perspective from which I come. However, psychologists have had a tendency to neglect this important dictum and to focus on either person or situation variables. In research on women and employment, in particular, the focus has been on person variables. Who are the women who have careers? What are their characteristics? etc.? This omission of situation variables and concentration on person variables has serious consequences when we try to draw policy implications from the research. First, we do not know what proportion of variance is accounted for by the significant person findings in contrast to situation and situation-person interactions. Summaries of research (e.g., Bowers, 1973) suggest that situation-person interactions generally account for more variance than situation or person variables. Thus, our money may be misdirected or directed less effectively when we utilize it based on studies dealing only with person variables. Second, and more importantly, variables may be confounded in our society, so that person explanations are used when characteristics which are really situationally determined could provide more parsimonious explanations. This happens, for example, when power differences, which may be situational, are interpreted as sex differences, because sex and power are frequently confounded in our society, and sex is the more visible variable, so it is more likely to receive attention.

For the rest of the time I have today, I will provide some examples of these points from the extensive literature on women and employment. My discussion will not, in any sense, be an exhaustive review, but rather, I will try to use the best examples I can find to illustrate my points.

Before I do that however, I will provide one other general illustration written in 1928. Virginia Woolf, in her incredibly insightful essay, "A room of one's own" (1957) really made the point which I am trying to make today. If you haven't read that delightful essay, I commend it to you. She was asked to give a talk on women and fiction. She contemplated why women did not write part of the extraordinary literature from Elizabethan England. She points out that "that old gentleman...who declared that it was impossible for any woman, past present, or to come, to have the genius of Shakespeare...Women cannot write the plays of Shakespeare." (p.48) was right at least for the time of Shakespeare, but his explanation was wrong. He was essentially saying it was because of their sex, a person variable. Virginia Woolf on the other hand, imagines a story of Shakespeare's gifted sister, Judith and shows how the situation would have made using her gifts very difficult, if not impossible; she explains the same circumstances using situation variables. "Any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty.... Had she survived, whatever she had written would have been twisted and deformed, issuing from a strained and morbid imagination. And undoubtedly I thought, looking at the shelf, where there are no plays by women, her work would have gone unsigned. That refuge she would have sought certainly." (pp 51-52) This is some of the reasoning leading to her conclusion "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction;" (p.4) Clearly, that conclusion has quite different policy implications than the person explanation that women can't write. But what is the relevance of these ideas today?

While the situational factors which would have impeded Shakespeare's sister or Jesus' sister in the song by Dory Previn (Did Jesus have a sister? Did they give her a chance?") have changed considerably, there are still numerous situational barriers to women's occupational involvement. To the extent that our policies focus on personal characteristics of women and ignore societal structures, we are not going to bring any real change.

In an extensive review of research on professional women's career development, from which I'll borrow heavily, Norma Calway-Fagen (note 1) shows how major theories of career development, which were developed to explain male

career patterns, rely heavily on person variables and thus do not account adequately for women's career patterns, which may be heavily determined by situation variables. Ginzberg's (1966) developmental theory emphasizes occupational choice as a long term process which is increasingly irreversible. His emphasis is on the psychological aspects of such choice, studying interests, values, etc. But, to the extent there is discrimination and a continuing sex stratification of occupations (situation variables) which limit women's choices, it must be questioned whether women choose occupational roles. Moreover, women's choices are revokable, with housewife as an ever-present alternative. A recent newspaper article illustrates this "I never intended to marry...I was completely career oriented. My ambition in life was to become the first woman vice-president of Shoney's Inc....But I found to be a good wife is a career in itself." (Keathley, 1978, p. 4-E). Women who choose to be housewives are also finding those choices change with divorce and/or the economic necessity of both spouses being employed. Thus, situational factors are important in understanding women's career development, and Ginzberg's theory fails to recognize this.

Super's (1953) theory provides some improvement in recognizing the relevance of life cycle demands. However, he fails to incorporate situational variables such as job market conditions and restrictions. Super treats cultural factors as static with the dynamic emphases given to personality.

Holland (1959) takes a person-situation view, but it is not sufficiently broad to recognize the appropriate situational variables which are of particular relevance to women. He posits occupational environments and modal personality orientations which correspond to them. He fails to recognize the structural barriers which women face beyond having a personality appropriate to the job. He also fails to recognize that occupational structures could be changed through policy which might promote different person/environment fits.

Thus, none of the major theories of career development are adequate to understand women's employment. They fail to recognize the importance of gender roles as a mediating variable (Calway-Fagen, note 1). Research derived from these theories, by failing to measure important situational aspects will lead to policies which try to "fix the woman" rather than "fixing the situation." To the extent that unmeasured variables are confounded with measured variables, the resulting policies are not likely to bring about the appropriate change. To the extent that the measured variables merely account for trivial proportions of the variance, resulting policies will produce only trivial amounts of change.

Thus, to understand women's career orientation, in addition to recognizing the standard internal factors, such as achievement orientation and personality, we must consider several kinds of external factors, including role-related variables such as marriage constraints and number and age of children, and background factors such as the availability of female role models (Calway-Fagen, note 1). The kind of influence these external factors now have are related to our social structure. For example, it has been found that women without children are more likely to be employed full-time in a professional career (Bailyn, 1964; Tropman, 1968;). If a societal goal is to encourage professional women to be employed full-time, a potential policy implication would be to discourage such women from having children. This misses an alternative situational approach, making adequate child care available to allow women with children to pursue professional careers. Where child care is readily available, the labor force participation rate of women with preschool children increases (Bowen&Finegan, 1969; Waldman&Gover, 1971) suggesting that personal preference is not the only reason for mothers' decreased labor force participation (Zellman, 1976). A further situational approach would attack societal perceptions of maternal roles and current misperceptions of the consequences of maternal employment. Currently, inadequate societal support for maternal employment reflects the attitude that employment for married women is an extra job and as such, it is the woman's responsibility to handle the pressures (Hall, 1975; Wallston & Calway-Fagen, note 2). Maternal employment, per se, does not have negative effects on children when adequate child care is available (Etaugh, 1974; Hoffman, 1974; Wallston & Citron, 1974) but myths regarding this tend to persist. A third situational approach questions full-time continuous employment as a standard (Calway-Fagen, note 1). Making meaningful part-time positions available with equitable salaries is another approach to improving labor utilization (Wallston & Calway-Fagen, note 2). To the extent that these social structural variables are changed, person variables may begin to account for more of the variance in understanding women's employment.

Up to this point, I have illustrated my ideas at a relatively abstract level because of the large body of literature on women and employment. Now, I would like to get to some more specific examples.

The research on "fear of success" is an important area related to achievement and thus to women and employment. As originally conceptualized by Horner (1968) this was a motive or stable personality characteristic which inhibited some women in achievement situations. In an excellent review and reconceptualization of this area of research Condry and Dyer (1976) suggest that fear of success

may be better understood as a situational variable. Women don't fear success, but fear instead the negative consequences of "deviating from traditional sex-role standards in certain situations. For women, the negative consequence that is probably feared most is male punishment. Thus, when women write stories showing ambivalence about success due to possible social rejection, loss of boy friends, etc., they are simply demonstrating a clear perception of reality." (p75). These authors point out the differences in policy implications of these two different conceptualizations. "Traits at best are difficult to change, and they imply a 'treatment' of the individual. If women are the victims of this process, then trait theories are tantamount to blaming the victim" (p. 76). On the other hand, the situational analysis suggests "attempting to deal with punitiveness (treating both the victim and the victimizers), (b) reducing the meaning of deviancy for both sexes by providing additional role models for both sexes, and--finally and eventually--(c) changing the role-specific norms and expectations of both sexes....no amount of individual preparation will be successful if there are not substantial changes in the social institutions in which both parenthood and careers are imbedded." (pp. 77-78).

I'll present one further example from my own research before I close. Several years ago, I conducted a study, in conjunction with Michael Berger and Martha Foster, on job seeking experiences of dual-career couples. We got two kinds of data: we asked about actual job seeking and we asked for responses to simulated job-seeking incidents. We found that while more than half of the couples' initial decision rules were equalitarian, only a quarter of the final rules were equalitarian, with most of the couples choosing traditional strategies (Berger, Foster & Wallston, 1978; Wallston, Foster & Berger, In Press). This could have been interpreted using person variables, arguing that these people were really more traditional than they say. However, we argue for a situational interpretation. The couples' explanations of their final decisions show that the job market frequently forced these traditional choices. Moreover, our simulation data provide support for this explanation. The simulated incident which provided appropriate situational factors conducive to egalitarian choices produced just that, with three-quarters of the participants choosing egalitarian strategies. When we added situational constraints to simulations, in particular, job market and time pressures, we significantly reduced the proportion of egalitarian choices. Had we not recognized

these situational factors and included them as variables in our research we would not be able to draw these conclusions and very different policy implications would be derived. Data from this study also show how situations can constrain and reduce the influence of personality factors. We divided study participants according to their self-reported feminist orientation. In the unconstrained simulated situation, this factor was significantly related to nontraditional job decisions. In the situation where job availability was more restricted, feminist orientation was significantly related to nontraditional decisions only for women. In the situation with the most constraints, there were no significant relationships between feminist orientation and type of decision. Similarly, feminist orientation did not relate to final job decisions, where situational constraints were overriding. Thus, we argue, based on our research, for a number of institutional changes to ease job seeking for dual career couples. Recognizing the stresses involved we also argue that psychosocial supports must be provided. We do not emphasize changing the person.

Numerous other examples of the differential implications of person versus situation variables are possible. I've provided a few of these within the area of women and employment to show the importance of the initial conceptualization to the final implications we draw. Research on women and employment has too often sought person explanations rather than looking at situational factors. Virginia Woolf recognized that creative writers were more than just people with talent. In order for that talent to be fruitful, they need a quiet place to write where they can work undisturbed and the freedom from the need to spend all their time trying to earn a living, things women tend not to have. Similarly, when we try to understand women's career orientation and employment, we must look not just intrapsychically to see whether women have suffient motivation, assertiveness, etc.; we must also look to the structural barriers and suggest ways to bring about changes in them.

In a now classic article, Bem and Bem (1970) point out the problem with sex role stereotyping in limiting women's potential: "Again, the important point is not that the role of homemaker is necessarily inferior, but that women's unique identity has been rendered irrelevant. Consider the following predictability test. When a boy is born, it is difficult to predict what he will be doing 25 years later. We cannot say whether he will be an artist or a doctor or a college

professor, because he will be permitted to develop and to fulfill his own unique identity, particularly if he is white and middle-class. But if the newborn child is a girl, we can usually predict with confidence how she will be spending her time 25 years later. Her individuality doesn't have to be considered because it will be irrelevant." (p.95).

Thus person variables become even less appropriate for understanding women's career development because of the strong situational influences.

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